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ABSTRACT

A videotape program was designed for use in news writing classes to provide journalism students with exposure to and experience in covering press conferences. The mock press conference format was selected because an analysis of journalism textbooks revealed little attention to this topic, and it was decided that an elected public official from the San Diego City Council should serve as the interviewee and that students from a public affairs reporting class should serve as members of the "press corps." A staff writer from the "San Diego Union" and a broadcast journalism professor also participated. The 33-minute mock press conference, in which students/reporters asked researched questions over a wide array of topics, was followed by an 18-minute evaluation. Comments solicited from students and instructors in three different classes who viewed the videotaped program during the spring 1990 semester indicated that, overall, the production was a useful educational experience. Research generating quantitative data regarding the effectiveness of this program as representative of visual communication is called for. (KEH)

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VISUAL COMMUNICATION DIVISION

MOCK PRESS CONFERENCE WITH SAN DIEGO DEPUTY MAYOR JUDY McCARTY:

A VISUAL COMMUNICATION 'EVENT' CREATED FOR NEWS WRITING STUDENTS

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MOCK PRESS CONFERENCE WITH SAN DIEGO DEPUTY MAYOR JUDY McCARTY:

A VISUAL COMMUNICATION 'EVENT' CREATED FOR NEWS WRITING STUDENTS

This 52-minute educational videotape was produced for use in news writing classes. The program is divided into two segments: a 33-minute mock press conference and an 18-minute evaluation given by a staff writer from the San Diego Union and a broadcast journalism professor. The evaluation segment is hosted by a journalism professor who teaches in the news-editorial emphasis.

Students in a public affairs reporting class served as members of the "press corps" with approximately half of the students specializing in broadcast journalism and the others in the news-editorial emphasis. The program is designed to be of use to present and future generations of news writing students to gain exposure to and experience in covering press conferences.

The mock press conference format was selected after an analysis of more than two dozen journalism textbooks revealed that little attention is given to press conferences. While journalism textbooks always deal with interviewing, the press conference has almost entirely escaped examination. Realizing that press conferences are likely to be events that both broadcast and print journalism majors will cover during their careers, the researchers in this project decided to use an elected public official--San Diego City Council member and deputy mayor Judy McCarty--and students from a public affairs reporting class.

METHOD

Students in the public affairs reporting class researched the questions to be asked at the press conference, delving into a wide array of topics that included airport expansion and/or relocation, sewerage system problems, mass transit plans, solid waste management, library development, traffic and growth issues, earthquake preparedness, city elections, and the image of politicians. McCarty was not told in advance what questions to expect. In preparing for the conference, students also discussed such things as press conference etiquette, follow-up questioning, topical and timely questions, use of "light" questions designed to get the subject to "warm up" to the audience, note taking, and how to deal with cooperative and uncooperative sources.

The taping took place in an on-campus studio through a collaborative effort that also involved an experienced television producer and four professional technicians. The producer brought in a photographer and arranged the set with a podium and press conference-like seating to give the program a more realistic appearance. The producer, in consultation with two journalism faculty producers, also edited and arranged titles and credits in the final version of the educational videotape. The production is now available to any faculty member in the University of California and California State University systems.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT CONTENT

The press conference began with one student asking the

deputy mayor what changes she had seen in the city's move to district-only elections. Prior to the 1989 elections, the top two finishers in a district had to campaign citywide in a general election to win a council seat. McCarty answered that limiting elections to districts only had caused several politically unsophisticated candidates to run for office. However, no student asked McCarty to name any of the politically unsophisticated candidates, a shortcoming pointed out in thee evaluation segment by the San Diego Union reporter. Extracting such information from McCarty could have provided some tantalizing news copy since it was generally acknowledged that one of the most politically unsophisticated candidates was swamped by McCarty in her district-only 1989 election. Still, it was just that sort of oversight that provides helpful lessons to students who can easily see that a follow-up question might have provided excellent news copy.

Another question dealt with what role McCarty's family plays in her political career. Intended as one of the "light" questions, the query generated a response that the family was often consulted and quite involved in her political career. That question was intended as a companion to a later question on the image of political candidates. In this case, the deputy mayor had been referred to as having a "just plain Judy" image by the city press corps. The "just plain Judy" question generated a lively response with McCarty accepting the label and telling the

students that she couldn't be someone other than herself and would not try to.

In the wake of the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, one student asked the deputy mayor about the city's level of earthquake preparedness, particularly with respect to the status of a city-owned stadium that houses the professional San Diego Chargers and San Diego Padres. McCarty was asked whether the stadium had been checked since the earthquake in a follow-up question that the San Diego Union reporter said was a good one. However, students did not always ask follow-up questions in a logical sequence.

During one portion of the press conference, McCarty was asked a question about recycling and the scarcity of landfill sites. The next questions were about plans for the enlargement of a city-owned stadium and improvements to the city library. Finally, a student returned to the recycling issue, asking whether the city has plans to market recyclables. Again, the San Diego Union reporter commented on the need to ask relevant follow-up questions and complimented the student who had returned to the recycling issue.

STUDENT COMMENTS

Since the mock press conference was designed to be used with present and future generations of news writing students, comments were solicited from students in three different classes who viewed the videotaped program during the Spring 1990 semester. The students were guaranteed anonymity. Students were from two

information gathering and reporting classes and one public affairs reporting class. Both are upper division classes.

Several of the students said they preferred learning through visual communication as opposed to learning through a textbook. They wrote:

--Watching a press conference is much more interesting than reading about one. Seeing and hearing what actually goes on is more helpful than reading about it in a textbook.

--The mock press conference was a good hands-on experience. It is always a much better learning experience to see rather than to read.

--It was more important to watch a press conference than to read about one because more can be learned from viewing. If you see something, it is more apt to stay in your head because your attention is grabbed.

On the other hand, several student comments critically analyzed the production. Those comments included:

--Many of the answers given by Judy McCarty were vague and the reporters did not get to the heart of a particular issue.

--The first segment was useful, but it seems that in live press conferences things move at a quicker pace and reporters have to be aggressive to be able to ask a question. They have to word their questions in such a manner that they can get past all the garbage.

--The students should have stood up when they spoke.

--A table could have been put in front of the experts who evaluated the conference. The set looked too empty.

Students also said that they learned a number of things from the program. Among those things are:

--The best thing about the press conference is that it offered participation and experience, while a lecture on a press conference only offers a page full of notes.

--The fact that Judy McCarty is an actual public figure and not an actress made the press conference that much more realistic and interesting.

--The mock press conference helped me because I had never really paid attention to one before. I had paid attention only as an interested citizen, but not as a reporter.

--The mock press conference is beneficial to students because you don't throw them into the real thing without experience.

--The critique following the conference was as valuable as the press conference itself. If the professional journalist had been used in this production, the viewer would only be exposed to what should be done and not given the opportunity to see what it was like for someone just starting who is unsure how to react to different responses made by the public figure.

--The tape is good for showing press conferences. You can't really capture a press conference in a textbook or even capture it by reading about a press conference in the newspaper. The tape shows the participants and their emotions, their exact words, their factual expressions . . . things that can't be as easily captured on paper.

Students also made suggestions on ways to improve the production. Among them:

--The reviewers should have shown more of the things that students did right rather than focusing on their mistakes.

--Maybe it would be a good idea to contrast the McCarty mock press conference with a real one so that students could see the real thing.

--The students looked a little nervous at the beginning and more relaxed toward the end. But they were not in control of the situation. A point-by-point discussion of that problem and others might have been better during the critique.

Finally, several students noted that it is always better to learn by doing. "The reporters at the conference are put on the spot," one student wrote. "They have to think on their feet just as the source does." Another student observed that "it is easier to learn from other people's mistakes than to see a picture-perfect example."

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The mock press conference is a visual communication concept that works, involving students in an experience that will be germane to their careers as reporters. Each of the 40 students who watched the mock press conference said that the production was a useful educational experience. The benefits to having such a videotape available for showing to news writing students are many and varied.

For example, nothing like this tape is commercially available, but the expenses in making such a tape are minimal. This particular tape was done with a grant of $400, much of which went to studio rental. What's more, the mock press conference allows students to observe other students in action, a kind of modeling process that has long been utilized in teaching.

From a technical standpoint, playing the videotape back on a VCR permits the instructor to stop the conference at any point to point out good or bad things. Students are able to discuss techniques, approaches, the phrasing of questions, etc., while they are fresh in mind. Furthermore, the videotape can be made available to students to view outside of class. Having the tape available to watch more than once allows more time on task for those who need it. While the content of the tape is not timeless, it does allow for repeated use without an instructor having to line up guests again in the near future. Of course, most of the topics in this tape are "relatively" timeless since earthquake preparedness, sewerage systems, the need for landfill

sites, and traffic and growth are issues that will be around for decades.

The mock press conference's main benefit perhaps is that it offers a visual example over just reading about or being lectured to about press conferences. Since there is scant attention paid to press conferences in journalism textbooks, the videotaped mock press conference provides a common foundation for the discussion of the "do's and don'ts" of reporting a press conference. The evaluation by the professors and a professional journalist who offer praise and criticism is a good way to promote discussion among students, as well.

In addition, the videotaped mock press conference is a good preliminary to having students do a press conference on their own and it is also a good preliminary to having students watch and critique a nationally televised press conference. And, although the press conference is a mock one, it does have the "trappings of reality" in that students research questions, take notes, and feel a part of a real setting with the presence of seating, lights and a photographer.

The mock press conference also can be used to discuss "light" questions versus hostile questions, and the tape can be used to show examples of press conference etiquette. The videotape also can serve as a teaching tool to show students what questions lack research or depth and can be a forum to discuss who controls the press conference--the press corps or the source? Finally, the videotaped press conference can serve as a writing

exercise for students who can cover the mock press conference as it if were a real one.

Future research in this area will include administering a standardized questionnaire to students in news writing classes who view this video to generate quantitative data in an effort to find out how effective this program is. Another program that could be produced is a videotaped mock press conference with an uncooperative source to determine how students would perform under this situation. In yet another video, good and bad examples of questions would draw immediate comment from reviewers so that film editing would be conducted to allow for quick discussion of these examples rather than to wait for the press conference to run its course and then have the reviewers comment.